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ABSTRACT

To affirm Sojourner Truth as a powerful rhetor who advanced the equality and empowerment of women, a study examined several of her speeches on women's suffrage. Although the value of using such role models as Sojourner Truth has been demonstrated in various grade levels, and in the study of history and English, the approach is too seldom employed in today's college classes studying rhetorical criticism. Additional analysis of this female voice is overdue in the field of speech communication. The goal of Sojourner Truth's life was to move the United States toward equality of the sexes, making it appropriate that the critical method used in the study is that of feminist criticism. The study analyzed how in these speeches, and from her perspective as a freed female slave of African descent, Sojourner Truth presented the situation of women; how women perceived society; and the way Sojourner Truth challenged post-Civil War assumptions about females. (The three speeches analyzed are attached. Contains 21 references.) (Author/NKA)

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Sojourner Truth As An Essential Part Of Rhetorical Theory

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ED 367 022

This paper is being presented at the National Annual Convention of the Speech & Communication Association, in Miami Beach, Florida on November 18, 1993.

Abstract

This paper examines several of Sojourner Truth's speeches on women's suffrage. The goal of Truth's life was to move the nation toward equality of the sexes, making it appropriate that the critical method used is feminist criticism. The paper discribes how Sojourner Truth presented the situation of women; how women perceived society, and the way Truth challenged post-Civil War assumptions about femininity. The purpose of this paper is to affirm Sojourner Truth as a powerful rhetor, who advanced the equality and empowerment of women.

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Undergraduate Student Debut Paper

Sojourner Truth As an Essential Part of Rhetorical Theory

Sojourner Truth was a brilliant speech-maker who originally spoke with religious zeal for abolitionists' goals. Truth turned her attention to women's suffrage upon urging from Elizabeth Cady Stanton during the post-war period (Gilbert & Gubar, 1985). Truth had been born into slavery and remained there for forty years. But when she became a free woman, she came to exemplify the oral tradition of early feminists. During her lifetime Truth worked for the causes of abolition, women's suffrage, temperance, the Union, and the establishment of homes for the newly freed people of the United States. Truth's powerful rhetoric challenged post-war assumptions about women's position in society through the use of religious metaphors and heightened logic.

The focus of this paper is to analyze Truth's speeches by using the feminist method of criticism. Because of Truth's dedication to establishing the equality of the genders---a goal of feminist criticism (e.g. Foss, 1989; Humm, 1986, Steeves, 1987)---the feminist method was used. It is important to note, however, that the feminist method being used, is employed by a young white middle-class

female. As such, one should not expect that the author purports to understand some of the subtle nuances of race and class that are present in Sojourner Truth's speeches. The perspective given in this paper, therefore, is strictly that of a feminist. The underlying goal of the paper is to advance the equality of genders in such a way that the empowerment of all women, regardless of race or class, will be achieved.

The application of the method begins by looking at Truth's speeches for an analysis of the conceptions of gender presented. The analysis continues by examining the effect of the artifacts' conception of gender on Truth's audiences. This paper concludes with how the artifact may be used to improve women's lives.

It is important to rhetorical study that Truth's speeches not only be analyzed for the way she challenged society's assumptions about women, but for the effects of her speeches upon her audiences and how her speeches successfully improved women's lives. Truth has earned a place in the tradition of rhetorical analysis of our nation's leaders. The purpose of this paper is to affirm Sojourner Truth as a powerful rhetor who advanced the equality of women and the improvement of women's lives. Further, although the value of using such role models as Sojourner Truth has been demonstrated in various grade levels, and the study of history and English (e.g. Harris, 1984; Hine, 1988; Larkins, 1988; Roro, 1983; Schmidt, 1984)

the approach is too seldom employed in today's college classes studying rhetorical criticism. Although North American knowledge and popularity of Truth as an historical figure has increased in recent years (Baron, 1989), additional analysis of this female voice is overdue in the field of speech communication.

Description of Sojourner Truth's Rhetoric

Dedicated to women's rights issues during the post-civil war period, Sojourner Truth traveled the country and frequently spoke on the equality of women. Truth's dedication to different causes was inspired by her deep religious conviction (Mabee, 1988), which her mother fostered during Truth's childhood (Terry, 1985). Even Truth's name was a symbol of her spiritual connection. When asked by a Quaker woman about her name, Truth responded, "Sojourner...'cause I'm to travel up and down the land." She used "Truth" because the person she perceived as her real master was Jesus Christ, also known as "truth" (Terry, 1985).

A key speech of Truth's was "Ain't I a Woman," given by Truth at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. The title of "Ain't I a Woman" refers to Truth's desire to establish herself as female even though many thought her African decent made her something less. She believed she was entitled to the same rights---meager as they may have been---as the other women present. In the first part of her speech, Truth discussed her strength, depicted by the images

of the hard labor she performed as a slave. But, she reinforced the idea that she was still a woman. The second theme she introduced was the idea that men should be ready for change because "'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1985, p. 253). Finally, she advocated women's rights by using logic based on Biblical studies to prove that women were equal to men.

A second major speech of Truth's was "What Time of Night It Is." This speech supported the fight for women's rights and was given to a New York audience of both men and women. In this speech, Truth rebuked the husbands and sons who failed to support their mothers' and wives' struggles for freedom. She encouraged women to keep up the fight for freedom despite the unpopularity of the cause.

A third momentous speech was "Keeping the Thing Going while Things are Stirring," in which she urged women to continue their struggle during the post-war season of change. In this speech, however, Truth took a different approach by repeatedly making references to slavery. For example, Truth stated, "so much good luck to have slavery partly destroyed, not entirely." Truth also urged men to prepare for a future of powerful women who would reward the men who supported them. She also---in this speech more than any other---stated her personal commitment to the struggle for equality and forcefully stated her beliefs by using

heightened logic.

Analysis of the Conceptions of Gender

In the analysis of the conceptions of gender, two key issues will be discussed: (a) how she described the experiences and perception of women and men, and (b) the depiction of femininity and masculinity. One can begin by analyzing the artifact for how she described the experiences and perceptions of women and men. Certainly, Truth's perspective was primarily one of a freed Female slave of African decent. Truth positioned herself as such when she stated in "Keeping the Thing Going While Things are Stirring": "I don't know how you will feel when I get through. I come from another field---the country of the slave."

In "Ain't I a Woman" she juxtaposed white women's experiences of being "helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere" with her experiences as a slave. Truth plowed, planted, harvested, all with the same work as any man (Gilbert & Gubar, 1985, p. 253). In this way she depicted experiences representing the slave more than the general experiences of all women in her society.

One thing that was especially moving in Truth's speech "Keeping the Thing Going while Things are Stirring," was how she compared slavery to the position of women, especially Black women of African decent in society:

They go out washing, which is about as high as a

> colored woman gets, and the men go about idle, strutting up and down; and when their women come home, they ask for their money and take it all, and then scold because there is no food. (Gilbert & Gubar, p. 255).

Truth did, however, speak for all women when she commented on how society attempted to silence women in the legal system. During her speech "Keeping the Thing Going while Things are Stirring" she related the anger women felt because they were denied rights, especially in the courts. Truth was aware of how the courts attempted to silence women due to her personal history in the court systems. In the Alabama and New York courts she fought to free her son from a plantation and won a lawsuit against whites who had slandered her (Pauli, 1962).

Truth spoke to women and former slaves alike when she related their feelings of increasing strength in the face of opposition. Truth stated, "We have all been thrown down so low that nobody thought we'd ever get up again; but we have been long enough trodden now; we will come up again..." (Gilbert & Gubar, p. 254). Truth chose to relate the experiences and feelings of a group that had just begun to feel empowered.

Finally, Truth made an attempt to adapt to the experiences of men in her audiences. She focused on showing how scared they must have felt because of the power they were losing as African-Americans and women created a new

place for themselves in society. In "Keeping the Thing Going while Things are Stirring," Truth voiced her assumptions about how men must have felt.

> You have been having our rights for so long, that you think, like a slave-holder, that you own us. I know that it is hard for one who has held the reins for so long to give up; it cuts like a knife. It will feel all better when it closes up again. (Gilbert & Gubar, p. 256)

Therefore, her words established that Sojourner Truth not only represented the experiences and feelings of women and freed slaves, but she understood the feelings of the men that women opposed.

The second area of analysis to consider is the depiction of femininity and masculinity in Truth's speeches. Truth's intention was to violate her society's representations of the ideal woman and the ideal man. North American society assumed that "(1) women suffer no ill effects under current laws, (2) women are intellectually inferior to men, thus requiring fewer opportunities; and (3) women's limited sphere was ordained by God" (Campbell, 1968, p. 435). As discussed above, in her speech "Ain't I a Woman", Truth negated society's practice of placing women on a pedestal by showing that women were capable of working as hard as men. Truth continued to speak about the need for women's voices in the courts and women's intellectual capabilities to disprove assumptions of women in society.

A commonly held idea was that men were superior to women because Jesus Christ was a man. Truth's patriarchal opponents attacked her on this issue of male superiority. Truth destroyed their argument when she said: "Where did your Christ come from?...From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him" (Gilbert & Gubar, p. 253).

Although generally not evidenced in the text of her speeches, reports of the speeches show that Truth challenged society's images of women even through her clothing and the way she carried herself. Truth's towering figure of six feet and her refusal to wear bloomers was unacceptable in a society where femininity was defined by appearance. She verbally challenged women and the images they portrayed through their clothing (Terry, 1985):

> You rig yourselves up in panniers and...grayhaired grandmothers wear high-heeled shoes and humps on their heads, and put them on their babies? 'Pears to me, you had better reform yourselves first.

Finally, it is important to understand how Truth's speeches suggested the behaviors, concerns, issues, values, qualities, and communication patterns of women and men apart from society's definition of gender at the time (Foss, 1989). Truth was successful in establishing the fact that women, despite what society demanded from them, were concerned about their rights. They wanted a voice in court, they wanted property, they wanted to be able to vote, and Truth voiced the women's demands. Furthermore, Truth

established that women could eat as much and work as hard as men. Truth disproved the theory that women were inferior because they were the "weaker sex." In her speech, "Ain't I a Woman", Truth even related that she could "bear the lash as well" as a man.

Truth's mere presence as a powerful rhetor challenged the assumptions that women should stay silent. Truth has empirically proven the power of women through her dedication to work and the long hours of travel and speaking that she accomplished. Truth established the assertiveness of women when she boasted in "What Time of Night It Is:" "We'll have our rights; see if we don't; and you can't stop us from them; see if you can." Truth's language and her attitude challenged men directly and confronted societal assumptions that her behavior was inappropriate for a woman. Truth's conceptions of gender substantiate that Truth confronted society's assumptions of women's roles.

Discovery of Effects on the Audience

What was the effect of Truth on her audiences? How did her confrontation of society affect those who heard her speak? As united women struggled for their rights during the post-war period, one would assume that Truth was welcomed as a powerful speaker with special insights into the values of freedom. This, however, was not the case. Sojourner Truth was often met with great opposition when she attempted to speak. Campbell relates that racial opposition was to be expected.

> Like their male counterparts, most white female abolitionists were racists, by which I mean that they believed Afro-Americans were naturally inferior and refused to associate with them in secular or religious organizations or to work for their integration into the economic, political, and social life of the nation before or after the Civil War. (p.434)

An example of racial opposition occurred when Truth gave her speech, "Ain't I a Woman." Women at the Women's Rights Convention in Ohio were afraid that their cause would be mixed with abolitionists' causes, which could adversely affect their efforts. The sponsor of the rally, Mrs. Gage, stated that many women approached her concerned about Truth speaking. They commented, "Don't let her speak, Mrs. Gage, it will ruin us. Every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed with abolition and niggers, and we shall be utterly denounced" (Narrative, 1968). Truth did, however, speak; and when that towering woman of over six feet began to talk, people listened (Narrative, 1968). Truth's use of logic to refute society's assumptions about women turned the tide of the meeting and the suffrage leaders then became grateful.

Over time citizens of the United States began to respect what Truth had to say. Truth became a legend, gaining fame during her lifetime (Pauli, 1962). President Lincoln met with Truth to discuss the issues of freed slaves (Mabee, 1988). Truth's own correspondence with her friend

indicated that the President had been receptive to Truth. She wrote, "He showed as much respect and kindness to the coloured persons present as to the white" (Porter, 1972). What Truth failed to mention in the letter is that she faced great opposition when she attempted to meet with President Lincoln. Truth waged the first sit-in, right in Lincoln's office, to demand that he acknowledge and speak with her (Harlowe, 1966).

When the words began to flow from Truth's mouth everyone was silent and attentive. "She possessed a natural dignity which was always felt by young and old" (Derby, 1940, p. 168). Even men listened. Through the use of interpellation, her tactics of positioning men as husbands, sons, and father, Truth created an emotional appeal to men. Perhaps the best example of interpellation by Truth occurred in "What Time of Night It Is" when she shamed sons and daughters for failing to respect their mothers' pursuits.

> God says: "honor your father and your mother." Sons and daughters ought to behave themselves before their mothers, but they do not. I can see them a-laughin', and pointin' at their mothers up here on the stage. They hiss when an aged woman comes forth. If they'd been brought up proper they'd have known better than hissin' like snakes and geeses. (Gilbert & Gubar, p. 255)

At this rebuke the audience quieted down and began to listen to what the women were trying to discuss. Truth was successful, if not at changing people's minds about women's

suffrage, at least in persuading them to consider her arguments. The women in Truth's audiences, however, felt empowered by her rhetoric and drew strength from her words. To experience Truth during those times must have been extraordinary, as her words are still able to empower and strengthen women today.

Value of Truth's Rhetoric

Sojourner Truth's rhetoric is a powerful testimony to the effectiveness of language and the ability of women to use public speaking as a means of advancing the equality of women to improve women's lives. There are a plethora of ways in which women and men can use Truth's rhetoric to establish equality among the genders. To begin, Truth's life as a powerful rhetor revives women's belief that their voices can be heard and that they can make a difference in societal attitudes about women. Truth's personal strength and her dedication to goals is a model for all feminists who seek role models to imitate and from which to draw strength.

Specifically in the fight for equality, Truth's testimony of physical strength can still be applied to combat the continuing assumptions concerning women as the "weaker sex." Her arguments for increased educational opportunities for women can be used whenever women are faced with patriarchal attitudes concerning men's supposed intellectual superiority.

Biblically speaking, Truth continually made arguments in her speeches supporting women's rights based on religious

learning. In today's society when there is so much opposition to feminists from religious fundamentalists, her arguments can be used to legitimate the advancement of women. A study of her life, and especially her speeches, will empower women who need Biblical references to prove their argument that women are equals in the eyes of the Christian God.

Finally women can learn from Truth's example of how to interpellate men into supporting their cause. Truth had a special finesse regarding maintaining the attention of men, and was able to persuade them to reconsider their arguments. Women can use Truth's tactics to open---rather than confrontation that may close---the minds of men. Truth was, indeed, important to the feminist tradition and now the study of her speeches can empower women, even over a hundred years after her death.

Explanation of Artifacts' Impact on Rhetorical Theory

It is important during this critical time in rhetorical theory that more women rhetors be included in the tradition. Sojourner Truth has already been established as a powerful historical figure. "Her story is better documented than almost any other former slave's" (Pauli, 1962). She was a legend and has been recognized as such. Now it is important to include her in the tradition of powerful rhetors.

Further, feminist criticism of her work could include examining the language she chose, as a woman, to support her ideas. The establishment of women's voices, through their

own language, is especially critical to women's advancement, as well as to rhetorical studies. How often do we see examples of Truth's work in basic public speaking text books? In textbooks about rhetorical criticism? In journals in our field? Although Campbell's work gave Truth a place in the early Afro-American rhetorical tradition, more focus on her feminist values is needed.

Reviewing the speech of Sojourner Truth and the responses of some of those around her can make ones blood run cold. One is struck by the enormity of the problems in that era, the roots of prejudice, and the intolerance by those in power. On one hand, one may be amazed how much we have changed from those times. On the other hand, one may be amazed at how little we have changed from those times.

When scholars acknowledge the power of women like Sojourner Truth, they empower all women. If women were equals, any American could quote the words of Sojourner Truth as easily as she or he might quote her cohort, Abraham Lincoln. If women were equals, the analysis of voices of women would have the same stature as the voices of men. Today's society may not consider Truth as an equal to Lincoln. I don't either. Given the times, the background, the context, Truth was Lincoln's superior.

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Appendix: SOJOURNER TRUTH'S SPEECHES

Ain't I a Woman?

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the Southland the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man -- when I could get it -- and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman!

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? (Intellect, someone whispers.) That's it honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negro's

rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not lot let me have my little half-measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.

1881-

1886

What Time of Night It Is

It is not good for me to come and draw forth a spirit, to see what kind of spirit people are of? I see that some of you have got the spirit of a goose, and some have got the spirit of a snake. I feel at home here. I come to you, citizens of New York, as I suppose you ought to be. I am a

citizen of the state of New York; I was born in it, and I was a slave in the state of New York; and now I am a good citizen of this state. I was born here, and I can tell you I feel at home here. I've been lookin' round and watchin' things, and I know a little mite 'bout Woman's Rights, too. I come forth to speak 'bout Woman's Rights, and want to throw in my little mite, to keep the scales a-movin'. I know that it feels a kind o' hissin' and ticklin' like to see a colored woman get up and tell you about things, and Woman's Rights. We have all been thrown down so low that nobody thought we'd ever get up again; but we have been long enough trodden now; we will come up again, and now I am here.

I was a-thinkin', when I see women contendin' for their rights, I was a-thinkin' what a difference there is now, and what there was in old times. I have only a few minutes to speak; but in the old times the kings of the earth wouldn't hear a woman. There was a king in the Scriptures; and then it was the Kings of the earth would kill a woman if she come into their presence; but Queen Ester come forth, for she was oppressed, and felt there was a great wrong, and she said I will die or I will bring my complaint before the King. Should the King of the United States be greater, or more crueler, or more harder? But the King, he raised up his sceptre and said: "Thy request shall be granted unto thee -- to the half of my kingdom will I grant thee!" Then he said he would hang Haman on the gallows he had made up high. but that is not what women come forward to contend. The women

want their rights as Esther. She only wanted to explain her rights. And he was so liberal that he said, "the half of my kingdom shall be granted to thee," and he did not wait for her to ask, he was so liberal with her.

Now, women do not ask half of a kingdom, but their rights, and they don't get 'em. When she comes to demand 'em, don't you hear how sons hiss their mothers like snakes because they ask for their rights; and can they ask for anything less? The King ordered Haman to be hung on the gallows which he prepared to hang others; but I do not want any man to be killed, but I am sorry to see them so short-minded. but we'll have our rights; see if we don't; and you can't stop us from them; see if you can. You may hiss as much as you like, but it is comin'. Women don't get half as much rights as they ought to; we want more, and we will have it. Jesus says: "What I say to one, I say to all -- watch!" I'm a-watchin'. god says: "Honor your father and your mother." Sons and daughters ought to behave themselves before their mothers, but they do not. I can see them a-laughlin', and pointin' at their mothers up her on the stage. They hiss when an aged woman comes forth. If they'd been brought up proper they'd have known better than hissin' like snakes and geese. I'm 'round watchin' these things, and I wanted to come up and say these few things to you, and I'm glad of the hearin' you give me. I wanted to tell you a mite about Woman's Rights, and so I came out and said so. I am

sitting' among you to watch; and every once and awhile I will come out and tell you what time of night it is.

1881-1886

Keeping the Thing Going While Things Are Stirring

My friends, I am rejoiced that you are glad, but I don't know how you will feel when I get through. I come from another field -- the country of the slave. They have got their liberty -- so much good luck to have slavery partly destroyed; not entirely. I want it root and branch destroyed. Then we will all be free indeed. I feel that if I have to answer for the deeds done in my body just as much as a man, I have a right to have just as much as a man. There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is till, it will take a great while to get it going again. White women are a great deal smarter, and know more than colored women, while colored women do not know scarcely anything. They go out washing, which is about as high as a

colored woman gets, and their men go about idle, strutting up and down; and when the women come home, they ask for their money and take it all, and then scold because there is no food." I want you to consider on that, chil'n. I call you chil'n; you are somebody's chil'n, and I am old enough to be mother of all that is here. I want women to have their rights. In the courts women have no right, no voice; nobody speaks for them. I wish woman to have her voice there among the pettifoggers. If it is not fit place for women, it is unfit for men to be there.

I am above eighty years old; it is about time for me to be going. I have been forty years a slave and forty years free, and would be here forty more to have equal rights for all. I suppose I am kept here because something remains for me to do; I suppose I am yet to help break the chain. I have done a great deal of work; as much as a man, but did not get so much pay. I sued to work in the field and bind grain, keeping up with the cradler, but men doing no more, got twice as much pay; so with the German women. They work in the field and do as much work, but do not get the pay. We do as much, we eat as much, we want as much. I suppose I am about he only colored woman that goes about to speak for the rights of the colored women. I want to keep the thing stirring, now that the ice is cracked. What we want is a little money. You men know that you get as much again as women when you write, or for what you do. When we get our rights we shall not have to come to you and may be you will ask us for money.

But help us now until we get it. It is a good consolation to know that when we have got this battle once fought we shall not be coming to you any more. You have been having our rights so long, that you think, like a slave-holder, that you own us. I know that it cuts like a knife. It will fee all the better when it closes up again. I have been in Washington about three years, seeing about these colored people. Now colored men have the right to vote. There ought to be equal rights now more than ever, since colored people have got their freedom. I am going to talk several times while I am here; so now I will do a little singing. I have not heard any singing since I came here.

1881-1886